

Tangible Memories

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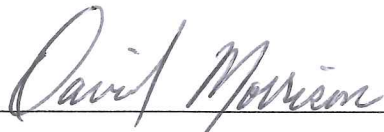
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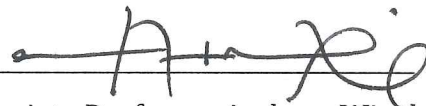
Tangible Memories

By
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Master of Fine Arts

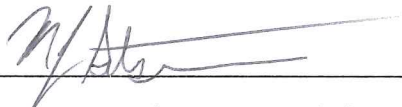
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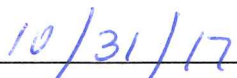


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In a small town in rural America, there is a decomposing deer head, which sits perched atop fencing, stacked against an old, rusty, red dump truck. Reflections of trees rest on the grimy glass of the windshield while clouds move leisurely across the country sky.

This is where I was raised; this is where I call home. Growing up, our house always had a wide collection of taxidermy animals because my father is a devoted hunter and outdoorsman. It was difficult for me to understand why he would display those lifeless remains with such pride and grandeur. I know, now, that they are nostalgic mementos that embody unforgettable tales from his past.

Inspired by his trophies and my own sentimental experiences of hunting and fishing, my artwork focuses on the animals I capture and kill while practicing these ritualistic customs, which have challenged and changed my personal philosophy. I have a fondness for these points in time, which make evident that life is unpredictable and transitory. Many may consider my work morbid, but I argue that Death does not have to always end with tragedy; it does not need to be feared and it should be expected and welcomed because it makes evident the cycle of life. Seeking everlasting life in a fleeting world, my work suspends and preserves nostalgic moments from my past, while using the universal language of death.

My fondest memories are when my father would take my mother, brother, and I out to our family pond on the weekends to shoot firearms. One evening, I was shooting my usual bottles and cans when I observed my father taking aim at a very different target. Along the edges of the pond there were cattails - tall reeds where you could commonly find red winged blackbirds moving back and forth in the wind. That day, I

watched my father point his rifle across the pond and fire at one of the birds.

Accomplishment spread across his face when he hit one of the birds. At that time, I felt no remorse, no sense of loss; I thought the birds were only something challenging to shoot. I wouldn't develop sensitivity to killing animals for sport until much later in life.

One day when I was a teenager, I was in my back yard with my pellet rifle. I was anxious, impulsive, and looking for something exciting to shoot, and then a bird landed about fifty yards out on a limb. I instantaneously took a shot off hand and the bird fell fast. I can still feel the regret as I walked up to the animal and the sight remains vividly burned into my mind. The bird I shot was the biggest, most beautiful blue jay I have ever seen - unsettlingly contorted in the grass. I continue to have a passion for these practices, however, I often contemplate the taking and killing of these animals.

Witnessing the moment when a living thing passes has changed me by challenging my affection for these ritualistic activities and forging my attitude toward death.

Becoming a proficient marksman and hunter is very much like my experience honing my skills as an artist. It takes commitment, patience, time, and, most importantly, passion. I make work about what I know, love, and question in relationship to my experiences growing up in the rural Midwest, where the killing of animals is a common practice. In nature, away from the every day stressors, I see a different hierarchy, a different set of laws, which seem to only exist in that place. It awakens a part of me that often gets lost in the world of modern man. There I am reminded of a redundancy of life and of my own mortality. There I can see beauty where there was none before, and I am able to empty my worries of the world.

Throughout our lives we develop a rhythm, our own personal understanding of the world. My life has led me to develop my own, personal mythology. This collection of gathered knowledge is informed by my interaction with the world. German Philosopher, Martin Heidegger, wrote about how humans are thrown into this existence; we begin life innocent and authentic. I agree with Heidegger, and I believe that we have the choice to conform to our surroundings, learning what is right and wrong, or defy our roots.¹ Growing up, my father carried the greatest Christian influence on my life. Being taught there was always a right and wrong choice to be made, I am constantly balancing my decisions in order to maintain a positive standing with my deity by enduring to adhere to the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus Christ, but also reminding myself that we each forge our path in our own way. Famous artist Andrew Wythe talked about his religious beliefs in a book about his life, which I cannot help but to think of when I am asked about my religious beliefs. Wythe talked about how religion was like a path in the woods. He said that there are many ways to walk through a forest, but when someone is shown only one way then they begin to teach others that path. Unfortunately, when someone is only taught one path through the woods, they begin to believe that that path is the only way to travel². This attitude toward religion mirrors my attitude toward my early indoctrination with hunting and killing. Many may see the customary practices of killing animals as barbaric, but I see them as my own forged path that has taught me a deeper appreciation for life and death.

¹ Martin Heidegger

² Andrew Wythe

Throughout my life, I have been intrigued by the concept of death. I am simultaneously terrified and captivated by the idea of finality. I suppose that there are many reasons why someone could fear death, but when I think of why I fear it, it is because I may be forced to answer for all of the decisions I made in my life. It seems that I have always considered death to be separate from life, as simply an end, rather than a start of something bigger. I now believe that this was always my way of coping with my own mortality. In life, death is certain, which ultimately leads me to consider an afterlife. As a Christian, I have the belief that we will be judged at the end of our lives. Because of this, I often tell myself that I do not fear death, but my actions and habits heavily contradict this statement. I find that I habitually cling to objects, which represent or embody people, places, and times. These personal artifacts enable me to recall long lost memories with great detail. I accept that my artwork mirrors this obsession with preservation of life and self. My artworks are the evidence of this life, they endure and protect my precious memories from decomposing with time. Both my father's trophies and my work were created to represent specific animals, emotions, moments, memories, and places in time. However, they are both mere imitations, because neither can fully express the reality from which they came. Regardless, I chose to make this body of work because I found that my father's taxidermy animals were rich with visual and conceptual material that stirred my fascination.

I have always had an unruly imagination and when I see deceased animals I oftentimes imagine what the animals would be thinking, if they were aware of their current situation. This internal empathy grows as I mature and I often envision myself occupying the bodies of the animals. This shift in perspective is beneficial because it

allows me to perceive my own life in a way that was hidden from me before. These animals in my work then begin to function like mirrors, only they reflect the internal. When I occupy this space I began to focus, dropping the stress and worries of everyday life. These animals now share only a glimpse of their past without containing a single breath; without a soul, they transcend and defy death. They are evidence that these things existed in this world, and they again lead me to think of a hereafter. They are the visual reminders that tell stories of a past and simultaneously foreshadow the future for all living things. My work stands before the viewer, frozen in time. The work wants to share where it came from, how it came to be all while revealing an unfortunate truth that everything must live and die. When I observe the animals in my work and my father's trophies, I am reminded that I, too, must take that voyage and leave behind my own affirmation of my existence. My artwork will stand as a trophy of my personal and professional life, remaining here on this earth to tell my story.

My artwork naturally inherits its melancholy from its creator. My sculptural reliefs, through their size, imagery, and first person perspective, lead the viewer to a conflicting situation. For example in "Hold Your Head Up" the viewers are confronted with a large severed deer head, which is being held up or presented to the viewer. My spectators are often puzzled with the work and question if I am promoting or condemning these practices. I consider this to be a successful interpretation of the work. One of my intentions in creating these pieces is to expose this personal dilemma and tell the whole story about the choices I have made. Some may find that the work is difficult to view because of the imagery, but this is the way of the world. Life is not black and white, and like everyone else, I do not know all of the answers. I cherish these

memories with my father figures, but that does not mean that I always condone the actions that take place during these experiences.

My relationship to these animals is very peculiar because I am very sympathetic towards their situation. The work plays on the viewer's empathy because they are positioned in front of reliefs, which depict dead animals. I choose to use the dead because I believe death is a universal language that everyone can understand. I want the viewer to contemplate their own existence, which then may help them to relate to the animals in the work. Francis Bacon says, "we are meat, we are all potential carcasses."³ I find Bacon to be crude but extremely effective because this quote embodies the visceral. In this statement, Bacon removes all of the value from the physical human body by calling it meat instead of flesh, cultivating images of packaged meat in a supermarket. He then goes on to say we are all potential carcasses, which again leads the mind to think of animals hanging in a meat locker instead of a body comfortably lying in a casket. This leads one to consider their body as nothing more than dead tissue. In Western society, there is a sense of detachment when regarding animals as only food and not living things. People see the chicken or cow as something that lives behind plastic in the grocery store or a brown patty that resides between two buns rather than the living, breathing entity that it used to be. Bacon's perspective has striped the inherent value of humans down to the level of all living things, removing the human from the top of the hierarchy, and leveling the plane that we all play an equal part in this existence.

³ (Deleuze, Gilles. *Body, Meat, and Spirit*. Pg. 22.).

I often proclaim that my work contains the texture of life. My artwork is so in sync, from the content, the materials, and the presentation; it seems to provoke a natural harmony. I believe this is most evident in my relief print "Dear Head". When I look over this print, I can't help but to feel that my eyes are scanning a tree line in late fall. In this work, a stack of fencing is nestled in tall weeds, which carries the weight of the prints composition. The fencing is leaning against an old dump truck, where a severed deer head sits atop for all to see. This print was created using multiple layers of different colored ink, which creates value and an illusion of depth. However, what makes this print uniquely intriguing is when the final print is then laser engraved. The ink interacts with the heat of the laser exceptionally creating an elusive collection of color, tone, and texture. This process is difficult for most to identify, which makes the process as elusive as the print itself. The print takes on a ghostly camouflage like quality, hiding in multiple layers of tone and surface texture. In this print, Death, which is represented by the deer head hides in plain sight waiting for the viewer to find an impression of life. I believe this piece is an authentic representation of my work ethic and craft developed throughout my entire life. However, my relief prints are mealy footprints when compared to my large Bas-Reliefs.

My bas-reliefs are to be presented together in order build context and to create a more complete a narrative, giving the viewers a glimpse into an often hidden area my life. Each piece is based on a photograph of mine, and each of them has a story to share, whether that be childhood memories, times with my father figures, an important place or with people who played an important role in my life.

However, the power of these pieces is in the medium used. The work begins a snapshot, which holds these moments captive and visually complete through the power of digital technology. I choose to transform these photographs into unique forms, giving them new life and releasing them back into the “real” world. Once I have the imagery that I am interested in, I upload the photo into computer-aided design software. There, I use a function in the program called Heightfield that perceives blacks as further away or lower and whites as closer or higher. I then manipulate the 3D surface generated from the photograph. I alter the values of my photographs in Photoshop and this manipulation creates a quasi-three-dimensional surface from the original photograph, which will then later be engraved using a CNC (computer numerical control) router.

My bas-reliefs use medium-density fiberboard, better known as MDF. This fiberboard is made up of very small residuals from hard and soft woods that are then combined with wax and resin binder. MDF lacks grain; it is essentially a compacted dust that can be carved into with minimal tear out, much like plaster. In creating my bas-reliefs, I also utilized the CNC machine, which is a computer controlled router that can move across three axis (x), (y), and (z). However, this also means that it cannot cut undercuts, which I add later in the process with hand-held wood-carving tools. In addition, I also incorporate a laser engraver, which is very similar to the CNC machine. The laser engraver is also a three-axis machine; however, it uses a focused laser beam to remove or burn material rather than using a metal bit to carve it. The benefit of using a laser engraver is that it is capable of burning or etching photographic-like images into materials very quickly.

Once these more technologically advanced processes are finished, I then use a torch to burn and create gradients of value on the work, which adds an intimate aspect to the process. It feels as though I am painting with the flame. At this stage of the process, I am actively engaging with the work, looking and listening. The burnt wood pervades the viewer's senses on more than just a perceptual level. As Maurice Merleau Ponty says in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the senses are never isolated; they are always functioning simultaneously⁴. Out of all of the senses, the sense of smell is associated the closest with memory. When a viewer is in close proximity to the work, they may notice the familiar scent of burnt wood, which can produce numerous cerebral representations associated with past experiences, a.k.a. triggering memories. I also correlate this scorching action with memory; the charred impressions are like the way a memory is burnt into the mind. When finishing the work, I use things like sandpaper, razor blades, and other sharp tools to scrape and remove material, creating highlights and adding detail until I feel it is complete.

I have a great love for materials and passion for the processes I choose to use, and this tends to show through my work. Although, I am formally trained in traditional printmaking techniques, I enjoy experimenting with new technologies, and I utilize this machinery with printmaking sensibilities, taking rigorous notes, and being very meticulous with the consistency of the production of these objects. I enjoy combining this cutting edge technology with classic printmaking techniques. I have decided to refer to these three-dimensional wood sculptures or objects as “tangible memories.”

⁴ Maurice Merleau Ponty

These moments will no longer be viewed solely as photographs, but they will ascend from their two-dimensional plane of existence.

My process allows the pieces to become more alive and tactile, like the world from which they came. These wall-mounted bas-reliefs feel solid, as though they could be made out of concrete. I believe that this adds to the heavy weight of the subject matter that they represent. They are divided into four panels, which fit together to create a whole image and are hung using a single French cleat. They are able to stand alone on a gallery wall, however they work best as a group. When presented in a quiet, dimly lit room with warm, dramatic lighting, these works have a powerful presence. This presentation elevates the work giving them a spiritual feeling, similar to a religious presence or experience one may have in a temple or at an altar. Here in this place, the work reveals some of my personal mythology regarding these ritualistic pastimes.

I consider the most successful quality of these pieces is their ability to inhabit the same space as the viewer. Their size eliminates the ability to hold and observe them; they become objects that confront the viewer. These massive pieces call the viewer from across the gallery and beg to start a conversation. The pieces do wonderful things when you are viewing them from because of the way they were made; it is captivating when the photograph rises out of the two-dimensional plane of wood and gets a greater sense of tangibility. When the viewer is positioned directly in front of the pieces, they resemble paintings or two-dimensional photographs. However, when one observes the artwork from side to side or inspects the pieces closer, they become more distorted or abstracted. The photographs are camouflaged and hidden, only explicitly

visible from the front. When viewed from other angles, the pieces bear a resemblance to topographical maps, riddled with hills and valleys rising and falling mimicking the ebb and flow of life. These ridges and basins create cast shadows that resemble the tree lines hold dear and have seen most of my life. It is a pleasure to get lost in the rich texture and materiality of the work, its lush tactile quality. They no longer seem to be made of wood; they become living, breathing representations like the taxidermies that inspired them.

As an artist, I want my work to outlive myself. I want it to speak for me, share stories with others. I am often asked when and how I know if my work is completed. In *Painting and Sensation*, Bacon is asked about different levels of feelings, and he responds, "I think it goes to a deeper thing: how do I feel I can make this image more immediately real to myself?"⁵ To me, this was the best description of how I feel about finishing my work. I strive for personal authenticity, when a piece feels genuine in its existence, I know it is completed. As for my audience, I believe Heidegger said it best "In a lecture, in 1961, Heidegger was asked how we might recover authenticity, he replied tersely that we should simply aim to spend more time 'in graveyards.'"⁶

⁵ Bacon page 35

⁶ <http://thephilosophersmail.com/perspective/the-great-philosophers-10-martin-heidegger/>

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography" Hill and Wang, 1980. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation" Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press,1981.Print.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Phenomenology of Perception" (from reading)

Images



Hold Your Head Up, bas-relief, 46"x46", 2016



Hold Up Your Head (detail_1), bas-relief, 2016



Hold Up Your Head (detail_2), bas-relief, 2016



Dear Head, reductive woodcut, 17"x22", 2016



Dear Head (detail), reductive woodcut, 2016



I Wish I Liked Squirrel, reductive woodcut and mixed media, 11"x15", 2015



I Wish I Liked Squirrel (detail), reductive woodcut and mixed media, 2015.

Installation Images

